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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of active adult learners in England to determine what impact, if any, there has been on their health as a result of learning. Data were obtained through a questionnaire mailed to 2,000 persons and 750 groups nominated for an Adult Learners' Week Award during 1998 and 1999. Provisions were made for sight-impaired respondents. Participants were asked about the general benefits of learning; unanticipated benefits of learning; "dis-benefits" of learning; learning and physical health; learning and mental and emotional health; and key influences. Questionnaires were returned by 473 individuals and 47 groups. Respondents varied in age from their early 20s to two who were over 90; more than half the respondents were aged 40-60; 70 percent of respondents were female; 40 percent were employed; 34 percent were not employed; and 23 percent were retired. Key findings include the following: (1) the greatest benefits experienced from learning are confidence, new friends and contact with other people, direct health benefits, and new employment or volunteer work; (2) unexpected benefits include self-confidence, personal discoveries, insight into relationships with other people, improvements at work, and new employment; (3) "dis-benefits" reported included stress and mental ill health, lack of time, fatigue, and insufficient money; (4) 87 percent of respondents reported benefits to their physical health and 89 percent felt they had experienced positive emotional or mental health benefits from learning. (Contains 11 references.) (KC)

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The Impact of Learning on Health

Fiona Aldridge and Peter Lavender

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NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties and disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

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Cover photographs by Nick Hayes

Headline findings

This research focuses on those people we know to be active learners and who could comment on what impact, if any, there has been on personal health as a result of learning. The responses are both a powerful argument for closer study and a strong justification for the belief that learning can make a difference to individuals, their health and the well-being of their families and friends.

The NIACE survey firmly supports the IES study, *Learning in Later Life* (Dench and Regan, 1999), which concluded, "This study does provide evidence that a high proportion of people benefit from learning in terms of their general well-being".

The key findings of this NIACE survey include:

- The greatest general benefits experienced from learning are: confidence; new friends and contact with other people; direct health benefits; and new employment or voluntary work.

- A number of respondents were surprised by unexpected benefits. These included (in size order): self-confidence (25%); personal discoveries about themselves and their relationships with other people; improvements at work, new employment or voluntary work; new achievements and skills; intergenerational benefits to children and family members; a sense of achievement and satisfaction; and health benefits including reduced stress and anxiety levels.

- Most learners reported experiencing 'disbenefits' at some time from their learning. These, however, were usually accompanied by significant benefits in other areas of their lives, providing them with the motivation to continue learning. The most significant 'disbenefits' were: stress, anxiety and mental ill health (39%); separation and stress (16%); and broken relationships (9%). Other disbenefits included dissatisfaction with their former way of life; family difficulties including child-care problems, lack of time and tiredness; and insufficient money.

- 87% of respondents reported benefits to their physical health. These included learners who felt less ill, managed pain more effectively and felt less tired. A third of the replies reported actual physical health benefits from their learning and this in turn encourages confidence and enjoyment. Strong themes emerging from responses also included managing better in spite of physical ill health, improvements to family health, better health behaviours and psychological well-being.

- 89% of respondents felt there had experienced positive emotional or mental health benefits from their period of learning. Benefits included "feeling mentally better"; changing health behaviours; distraction from dwelling on ill health or poor circumstances; and psychological displacement activity helping them to deal with

pain such as bereavement. Many respondents attributed their improved sense of mental well-being to the new-found confidence and enjoyment of learning.

- Also of interest is 20% of learners were encouraged to attend adult education opportunities by education staff. This is a key method of encouraging people to become learners, at least at beginner stages.

Further research is needed to identify the extent of health improvement through learning and to establish how those who do not participate can best be encouraged to do so. In both areas a development of the roles and relationships between health and education staff is crucial. For education providers there is greater work to be done to develop programmes in which health settings are used to bring opportunities to people who do not participate in education.

Fiona Aldridge
Peter Lavender
May 2000

Introduction

NIACE developed a strategy for learning and health in 1999 for several reasons:

1. A number of Adult Learners' Week Award Winners had mentioned that their involvement in adult learning had started as a result of a suggestion by their GP

2. The development of significant NIACE research and development projects around health such as the ground-breaking work on mental health and adult learning (Wertheimer, 1997)

3. The increasing number of evaluations and studies on the health benefits of learning (McGivney, 1998) which indicated a correlation between the maintenance of health and increased participation in learning

4. The increased interest in joint work between primary health care professionals and providers of adult learning opportunities through, for example, Lifelong Learning Partnerships and Health Action Zones

5. Learning and Health is a priority for Adult Learners' Week 2000 and is supported by funding from the European Social Fund.

This small-scale research focuses on those people who are known to be active learners and who could comment on what impact, if any, there had been on personal health as a result of learning. The responses are both a powerful argument for closer study and a strong justification for the belief that learning can make a difference to individuals, their health, and the well-being of their families and friends. This survey is just a beginning, not an end, as NIACE intends to develop the programme in three ways:

- By carrying out a further study of primary health care professionals including GPs, and their referrals to education provision;

- By monitoring and encouraging existing projects which link together primary health care and providers of adult learning opportunities; and

- Through direct pilot work, such as the 'Prescriptions for Learning' project in partnership with Greater Nottingham Lifelong Learning Partnership.

Context

Significant links can be made between public health and lifelong learning and Government policy has begun to move in this direction. The aims of the recently established national research centre on the wider benefits of learning, include the production and application of

> "Models for measuring and analysing the contribution that learning makes to wider goals including (but not limited to) social cohesion, active citizenship, active ageing and improved health"
>
> (Specification for a research centre on the wider benefits of learning, DfEE, 1999a)

The Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998a), sought to "put learning at the heart of its ambition" and spoke of the wider contribution that learning can make to "the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation". In the White Paper, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999b), a strong commitment was made to the needs of adult learners, including the broader benefits of learning through, for example, helping "communities to help themselves".

A week after the publication of *Learning to Succeed* a new Health White Paper was published, *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation* (DoH, 1999). The Health White Paper stated that "...too many people suffer from poor health. Too many people are ill for much of their lives. Too many people die too young from illnesses which are preventable".

Saving Lives (DoH, 1999) argues that improving public health can only be achieved by collective action. To emphasise the point the White Paper is signed by ministers from Departments of Health, Social Security, the Home Office, Education and Employment, Trade and Industry, International Development, Environment, and Agriculture. Some key points of the Government's action plan include:

- tough but attainable targets in priority areas (cancer, heart disease/stroke, accidents, mental illness);
- putting in more money (£21 billion for the NHS alone);
- tackling smoking;
- integrating Government and local government work to improve health;
- stressing health improvement as a key role for the NHS;
- pressing for higher health standards.

The health proposals are based on the belief that poor health can be attributable to social, economic and environmental factors, and that "individuals can make decisions about their and their families' health which can make a difference" (DoH, 1999). The Government recognises that there are inequalities in health as there are in education and housing, and that there is a link between many of the factors which contribute to poor health – poverty, low wages, unemployment, poor initial education, sub-standard housing, crime and disorder and a polluted environment. *Saving Lives* states,

"Education is vital to health. People with low levels of educational achievement are more likely to have poor health as adults... By improving education for all we will tackle one of the main causes of inequality in health".

(4.16, DoH, 1999)

A key intention in the Health White Paper is that there should be increased education and training for health for the health workforce. What is not yet recognised clearly are the potential benefits to health of developments in lifelong learning. The reason for this is that there is insufficient evidence from research and development programmes of the health benefits of learning. However, *Our Healthier Nation* (1999), the Government's 'contract for health', argues that "developing education and training for the workforce must be a priority (1.12)". This survey report suggests that learning and health should be an important area of policy for the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment.

There have been other pilot studies. In Kent, for example, Challis (1996) found that when former non-participants got involved in learning as a direct referral from their GP they reported both physical and mental health improvements as a result. As students reported:

"I have gained so much confidence"
"My blood pressure is lower and I feel lighter"
"I was reluctant at first but very pleased now".

Later, Allies (1997) reported on a project in Gloucester, which placed an adult education worker in general practices with the aim of targeting and improving the well being of patients who would not otherwise have the confidence or knowledge to seek out educational opportunities. This time, the focus was not on keeping physically fit with exercise classes, as in Kent, but in Gloucester all kinds of learning were taken up across the curriculum. The worker became an integral part of the primary health care team and the study found that such direct action did result in widened access to educational opportunities for under-represented sections of the community.

As one student testified:

"If I had not obtained the information at the surgery I would not have attended the college. The information and advice I received was very good, it gave me a direction and the confidence I needed to take on a course."

Another said:

"I think it is a very good idea to have the adult information service at your surgery. At least you are in familiar surroundings. It certainly made me feel very comfortable and more relaxed."

The NIACE project which will take place in collaboration with the Greater Nottingham Learning Partnership will take some of the best elements from both the earlier projects and work in the context of both a lifelong learning partnership and a health action zone. A 'learning advisor' will offer 'prescriptions for learning' in three GP surgeries in one particular Patient Care Group, offering educational advice and guidance and creating a link between education providers, primary health care professionals, and people who may not have participated in learning since leaving school.

Participation in adult learning among some groups is poor. In *Marking Time* (NIACE, 1999) a weighted sample of over 5,000 adults was questioned about their learning. Although 60% of the adult population have undertaken some form of learning recently, 40% have not. Those who do not participate tend to be those who left full-time education later and come from professional, managerial and white-collar social classes. Of those who are not participating in learning, over 80% said that they had no intention of doing so in the future. For many people in Britain, education is associated with failure and schooling, not with any satisfying or life-enhancing experiences.

Reaching adults who do not participate in learning is another reason for wanting to see more projects like the ones in Nottingham, Gloucester and Kent: health settings may be a way of bringing opportunities to people who believe education is not for them.

The research

As part of NIACE's Learning and Health Strategy, a small-scale survey was conducted to ascertain the impact that learning has upon health. A postal questionnaire was sent to the 2,000 individuals and 750 groups nominated for an Adult Learners' Week Award during 1998 and 1999. Telephone interviews were offered for those who would have difficulty making a written response as well as questionnaires on tape, in Braille and in large print. The questionnaire was anonymous. However, respondents were invited to include contact details if they were interested in sharing their experiences further.

The questionnaire was tested through discussion with the National Adult Learners' Forum, and was designed to ask respondents about the following:

- general benefits of learning;
- unanticipated benefits of learning;
- dis-benefits of learning;
- learning and physical health;
- learning and mental/emotional health;
- key influencers.

Respondents were sent a copy of the following National Adult Learning Survey (DfEE, 1998b) definition of learning to help them think as widely as possible about the learning activities they have been involved in:

"By learning we mean both taught and non-taught learning. Taught learning includes:

- Any taught courses meant to lead to qualifications;
- Any taught courses designed to develop skills that might be used in a job;
- Any courses, instruction or tuition in driving, playing a musical instrument, in an art or craft, in a sport or any practical skill;
- Evening classes;
- Learning involving work on one's own from a package of materials provided by an employer, college, commercial organisation, or other training provider;
- Any other taught course, instruction, tuition.

Non-taught learning includes:

- Studying for qualifications without taking part in a course;
- Supervised training while actually doing a job (i.e. when a manager or experienced colleague has spent time helping an individual to learn or develop skills as they do specific tasks at work);
- Time spent keeping up to date with developments in the type of work done without taking part in a taught course – for example by reading books, manuals or journals or attending seminars;
- Deliberately trying to improve one's self-knowledge about anything or teach yourself a skill without taking part in a taught course."

(National Adult Learning Survey, DfEE, 1998b)

The respondents

473 individual and 47 group questionnaires were completed and returned. The following information refers to individual respondents:

- Respondents were equally divided between those who had been nominated in 1998 and those who had been nominated in 1999;
- Respondents varied in age from their early 20s to two respondents aged over 90. Over half of the respondents were aged between 40 and 60;

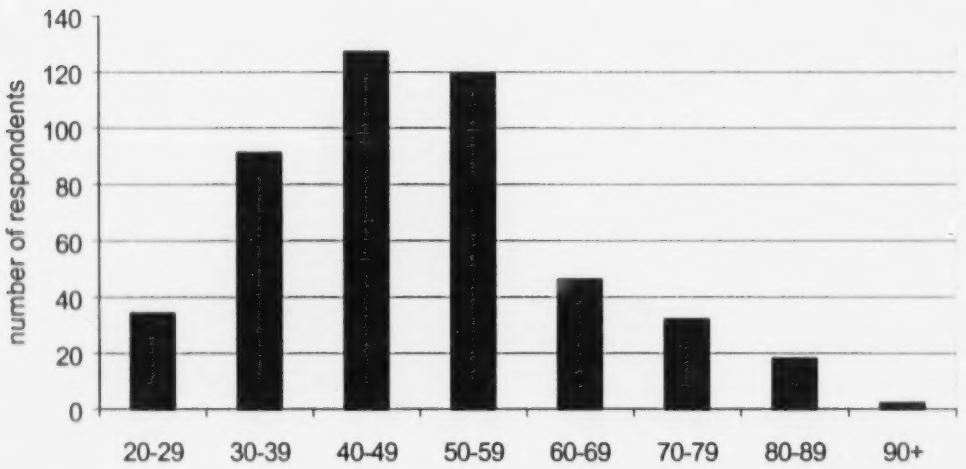

Figure 1: Age of Respondents

- Nearly 70% of respondents were female;
- 40% of respondents were employed, 34% were not employed and 23% were retired;
- 40% of respondents left school aged 15 or under, another 40% of respondents left school at 16;
- 83% of respondents had some sort of qualification, either from school or subsequent learning;

- 80% of respondents are currently involved in some form of learning, including:

Information and Communication Technologies	25%
Arts and crafts	20%
Humanities	12%
English/maths	9%
Health, beauty or exercise	8%
Teacher training	5%

(percentages based on the 373 respondents who answered the question)

Other learning included professional development, learning to drive, playing an instrument, science, citizenship. Some respondents were involved in learning many different types of learning.

For the majority of learners, the subject that they had chosen to study had no direct connection to health.

- Those not currently involved in learning identified the following reasons:

Work commitments	32%
Health	19%
Family commitments	13%
Just finished/waiting to start a course	12%
Money	9%

(percentages based on the 91 respondents who answered the question)

Other reasons included lack of time, poor transport and lack of support.

- 90% of respondents intend to undertake some learning in the future. Of these,

Would like to take their learning to a higher level	13%
Would like to study something new but are undecided as to what	12%
Will be continuing with current learning	9%
Would like to study:	
Information and Communication Technologies	24%
Arts and crafts	15%
Humanities	12%
Health, beauty or exercise	7%
English/maths	6%
Teacher training	4%

(percentages based on the 415 respondents who indicated that they intend to undertake some learning in the future)

Other future possibilities include care work, professional development, sign language, music, law. Many respondents were keen to learn to take part in a wide variety of learning.

- When asked if they could identify factors that would prevent them learning in the future, respondents gave the following answers:

Money	43%
Time/other commitments	28%
Health	14%
Distance/lack of transport	7%

(percentages based on the 58 respondents who answered the question)

Other reasons included lack of confidence, support and childcare facilities. Three respondents did not feel the need to take part in further learning.

- Nationally, 22% of adults are currently involved in learning and 38% expect to be involved with learning in the future (NIACE, 1999). Our figures are particularly high as the survey was targeted at those who have already displayed a commitment to and enthusiasm for adult learning.

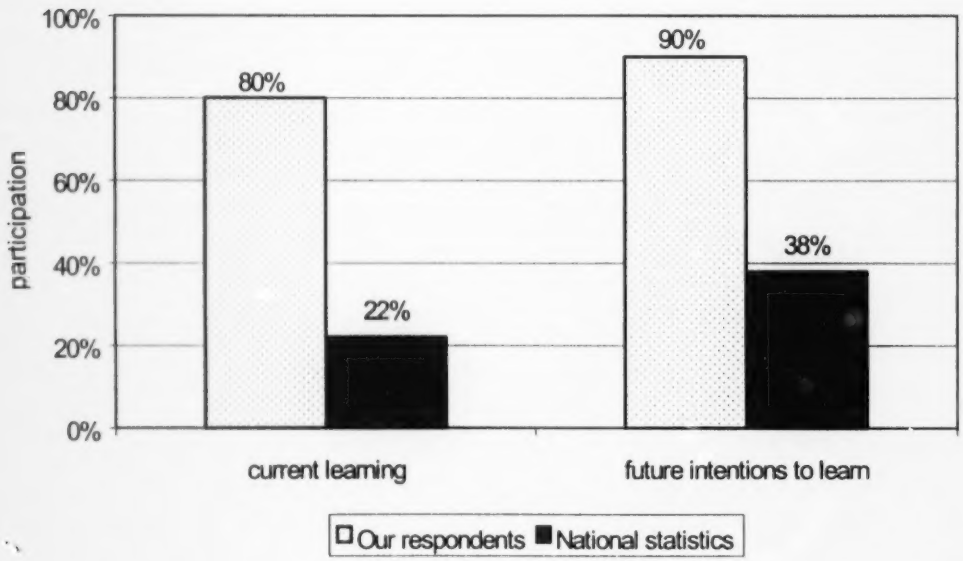

Figure 2: Comparison with National Statistics

- When asked if they could think of anyone who had influenced them to take up learning, respondents identified the following:

Tutors and other staff	20%
Friends	19%
Partner	15%
Self-motivated	10%
Family	9%
Primary health care professionals	8%
Children	8%
Care staff/Day centre staff/Social workers	7%
Parents	6%
Colleagues	4%

(percentages based on the 387 respondents who answered the question)

- When asked who continued to influence or support them during their learning, respondents identified the following:

Tutors and other staff	41%
Partner	30%
Friends (both on and off the course)	27%
Family	26%
Children	13%
Colleagues	7%
Parents	6%
Self-motivated	5%
Care staff/Day centre staff/Social workers	4%
Primary health care professionals	3%

(percentages based on the 402 respondents who answered the question)

- Only 47 group questionnaires out of a possible 500 were returned. The main reason for this was that many of the groups nominated met together to study a specific subject during a term or academic year. One or two years later, the groups no longer continue to meet.

General benefits

A number of general benefits from learning were reported.

1. Confidence, human contact and friends were understandably the most popular comments:

   - Gained confidence, made new friends
     (ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - As a cancer patient I lead an isolated life as people do desert you. I find education a way of staying in touch with the outside world
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - Learning has given me a new-found confidence. I am now able to help my children with schoolwork. I can confidently deal with people in authority, and I feel I can attempt anything and succeed
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - I have developed new skills and made new friends. I have more confidence especially after leaving work and becoming disabled. There is a need to still be of use and belong
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - Self-esteem, confidence, new friends, being more useful and being able to help others which makes me feel good
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

2. A second key strand of responses related to direct health benefits, even when respondents were not asked about health. Most of these comments related to reduced stress, alleviated depression or increased well-being:

   - Developed new interest in oils and herbs, communicated more easily with people, made new friends, stress and depression reduced
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - Meeting new people, feeling good about myself, gained confidence and new skills, dwell less on my illness
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - More self-confidence. I came from having a nervous breakdown to where I am today. It helps being able to talk about dyslexia and epilepsy and how it affects you
     (1999 ALW nominee, male, aged 50-59)

- I developed new skills and interests in computer studies. I found the challenge stimulating and made new friends. Most importantly it was of great help keeping clinical depression at bay
  (1998 ALW nominee, aged 60-69)

- Gained more confidence, promotion within my post, more respect from colleagues and friends, less depression, less obsession with minor tasks like housework and an increased desire to learn more
  (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

3. A third strand of general responses included skills learned which in turn brought confidence or new employment opportunities:

   - Increased confidence, improved literacy skills
     (1999 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59)

   - Got my privacy and independence as people don't have to read and write for me. I can now read history books
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 60-69)

   - I feel I have been developing since I started adult education 5 years ago. The new-found confidence and self-esteem are directly linked to achieving results through adult education, as a result of which I have secured a well-paid career
     (1999 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59, employed)

   - Developed new skills using a computer and keyboard
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 40-49)

   - Photo essay helped me to concentrate on the positive aspects of visual creation when unemployed, with voluntary work leading to 'paid' outlets, and no interviews coming from the application. I met lots of people and went to places I had never been before and created a will to survive.
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 50-59, employed)

   - The last time I was in education was at school and when I started adult learning I was 38 years old. I chose pottery and ceramics as it was called. Now my family have moved and we have an outbuilding to work in and now I have my own business making garden pots and teaching from the college. This allows me to have lots of projects with the local schools and colleges as well as youth clubs and all my own work
     (1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 40-49)

4. Finally, there was a mixture of benefits in which the learner could not determine what had led to which benefit. The following responses were typical:

   - Made new friends, more understanding of special needs, developed more confidence, built up self-esteem
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

   - The benefits were numerous. Before my studies I was very ill and had a nervous breakdown. College gave me back my self-esteem and confidence but above all self-respect. I was not aware of my own capabilities. My tutors' guidance and understanding was unbelievable. Without them, God knows where I would be today. The first step was the hardest. I have made many friends young and old – great
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - I have gained new skills, friends, confidence and a better understanding of individual needs. I am much more aware of how my children's school is run and how parents can help their own children
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - You can make new friends and gain from each other's experiences. Qualifications, achieving goals, raising of self-esteem, being more confident and seeing people's points of view are all benefits
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

Unanticipated benefits

Perhaps the retired man in his 60s who said, 'I like my new life. Thank you adult education!' expresses best some of the many answers given by respondents to the question, 'Were there any *unanticipated* benefits from your learning?' Learners expressed surprise at many things they had not expected.

1. For a quarter of them it was the increased self-confidence, particularly with other people, greater self-esteem or a sharper self-awareness that came to mind.

    - My self-esteem has improved greatly and I am more confident communicating with others and look for better options in my life (such as getting a good job in a primary school)
      (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39, employed)

    - Confidence improved greatly, stress and depression reduced, feel more happy and confident in life
      (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

    - I didn't expect to have as much confidence as I have now
      (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

    - Lots of laughter, skills, new friends and far more confidence
      (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 60-69)

    - It has helped me sustain a better mental attitude to life. I depend on going to college. At college we call it the 'BUG' to learn. The most important factor is that you actually feel like part of society again, especially after feeling so let down by my redundancy in 1992
      (1999 ALW winner, male, aged 40-49, not employed)

2. For some, it was a more personal discovery about other people and themselves:

    - More understanding and acceptance of people with learning difficulties
      (1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 50-59)

    - I thought I was stupid and unable to learn
      (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39, now gained qualifications)

    - Getting on with young people and understanding them much more
      (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

3. A third unexpected outcome for learners were improvements at work, new employment or a new focus in voluntary work. Some 18% of respondents commented on this aspect:

   - In my job at work I have been given a wider range of work including computer courses
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - Being accepted as a community services advisor
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39, previously unemployed)

   - I set up hedgehog rescue and got a millennium award for it. I go to schools doing courses about hedgehogs, the environment and habitat loss, etc.
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - I started my own bridalwear business and I have gained so much confidence and I can communicate better with people
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - There have been so many that it is hard to tell of them all. I was a bankrupt husband with two very small children and since starting college I have so many new interests as well as a new career. It is with great pride that I can say I am a part-time lecturer.
     (1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 40-49)

4. A fourth group of respondents were the 8% who found many interlinked new achievements, skills and talents as a result of learning:

   - I find that people take more interest in my opinions and ask for them. It has also given me a thirst for knowledge and a way to put it to practical use. It has made me more disciplined in sticking to timetables
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - Self-confidence and self-worth. I find that I have been able to put my knowledge of something I learnt to help others
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - I have gained good qualifications therefore confidence. I never envisaged being able to sit an exam in the beginning, my main objective was to slowly rebuild my life
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - There is a general sense of more awareness of how the world operates politically, educationally and psychologically
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

- I have more flexibility in various ways, I am able to adapt to things and people around me. I am a lot less regimented in my ways even though I still have a tendency under stress
  (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

5. The intergenerational changes were also noticeable. Respondents were surprised at how the rest of the family benefited:

   - My learning experiences have changed all of my family's lives, I went to college to learn about dyslexia three years ago on a 10-week course and I am still there. My son, daughter and husband are all dyslexic. Before college I felt at my wits' end and I didn't know where to go for help. The support I received was overwhelming. My knowledge has improved all of their lives as well. I decide to become a college volunteer so that I can share my experiences with other families. I also continue to learn new skills and new courses for my own self-worth
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - I am more alert and I find I'm buzzing with ideas. The more I learn the more I want to learn. I was very pleased to be able to help my daughter, who is training to be a primary school teacher, with her dissertation. I couldn't have done that before
     (1999 ALW nominee, male, aged 60-69)

   - Again, my confidence really. I do lack confidence but I am better than I was. Also being able to help my children with their homework
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - My daughters' outlooks on life have changed and they are now better at Maths and their reading age has improved. My confidence in my abilities and myself has improved
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - Self-confidence and self-esteem. My children appreciate the need for learning for their future as well as expanding their knowledge
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

6. For many learners, the sense of achievement and satisfaction was much more than had been expected and this new-found satisfaction was reported by 8% of respondents:

   - BA Hons first class!
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 60-69)

- I decided to carry on until I hit a brick wall. I did not expect to get as far as I have in education. I can use a computer which I never expected to do. The main benefit is general education. I can now fill in forms like this which previously I avoided *(1999 ALW nominee, male, aged 40-49)*

- I didn't realise what I was capable of achieving *(1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 30-39)*

- Recognition of past experience and achievements *(1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 60-69)*

7. Unanticipated health benefits, including less stress and anxiety, were reported by 8% of respondents, the fourth largest group:

- Improved mental health. Many people thought it wouldn't work, but they were wrong *(1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 30-39)*

- I have been suffering with ill health for some time. The social activity has improved my well-being and the brainwork has improved my recovery *(1999 ALW nominee, male, aged 70-79)*

LW nominee, male, aged 70-79)

- Acknowledgement of experience from other people, more respect as a human being, belief in myself again, improved health and well-being, new lease of life *(1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 60-69)*

- I now have a choice of occupations and locations that I can work in if I want to. My health has improved and I feel more alive *(1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 50-59)*

- It was helpful to draw me out of depression – stimulation *(1998 ALW nominee, male)*

- My studying skills have improved and my communication skills have practically been restored to what they were before my illness began *(1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)*

'Disbenefits' experienced

Respondents were asked whether there had been any 'disbenefits' to learning and the majority said there were.

1. The largest group of 'disbenefits', some 39%, included stress, mental ill health and anxiety:

   - Became clinically depressed during my course
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

   - The stress of actually getting to the course and maintaining concentration and alertness (and interacting with others when I felt terrible) was enormous. I pushed myself too hard and precipitated an illness necessitating three weeks in hospital and appointments afterwards
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - Definitely stress, before my return to learning I had never had a headache and now I am rarely without one. Despite this, I would still do the same again. Headaches are better than boredom
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 50-59)

   - It has caused me a bit of stress when my husband tries to help me. I also get stressed when I can't do something and I feel like giving up
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

2. Perhaps the best known group of disbenefits is the syndrome familiar to viewers of the film *Educating Rita*. That learning can bring great benefits but it can also change your way of life so that dissatisfaction with the former life creates a kind of displacement:

   - It has stopped me accepting the way of life that I once would have. It has made me intolerant of books, films and TV that I once thought were OK. I got very depressed when I was doing a job where I was undervalued and under-used. But it was because of my education that I am able to have a much better lifestyle
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 40-49)

   - I have had less time to spend with my family. I have had to change priorities as to what is necessary. By the third Saturday night I had told my husband I had to do my homework first and he ended our relationship. I work late into the night as this is the best time as I get no intrusions, but I find that I cannot sleep until 2.30am or so
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

3. Also on the *Educating Rita* theme, a significant number of respondents (9%) spoke of broken marriages which they traced to the wider horizons opened up by new learning. Some with evident sadness reflected on this, but others found these changes inevitable and in some ways a relief:

   - I have suffered a broken marriage since starting back into education, but this is down to personal growth and new confidence
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 20-29)

   - I did get very stressed when ill health prevented submission of projects on time. My husband felt threatened by my new growth and left me for a younger woman (probably did me a favour – he was holding me back)
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 50-59)

   - I neglected my spouse when I was studying because of lots of homework
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - I had a relationship problem. My boyfriend (now ex) did not like me going out and being better qualified in agriculture than he was
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - It resulted in relationship breakdown, but this was because my partner could not understand my thirst for self-improvement and became jealous. I was very stressed at times trying to juggle essays and being a single parent of a teenage son with medical behavioural problems
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - No, it helped to empower me and leave a violent relationship
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

4. The fourth largest group of disbenefits, some 16% of respondents, concerned the family. Women particularly commented on family difficulties, including childcare problems, separation and stress:

   - At times I have felt that my husband has resented the time I have been spending away from household chores. He is 76 years of age and rather Victorian in his attitude to the woman's place being in the home!
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 60-69)

   - I had trouble parking near to college and I was under pressure not to leave my child. On several visits I had to leave early because my child was not well and there are not many facilities
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

- Stress of finding babysitters and homework
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

5. Lack of time and tiredness were reported by 12% of respondents:

   - Sometimes I feel as though I don't have quality time to give to my family and myself. But I am trying my best to put it all into perspective
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - When I first started my course I got very tired which affected my children and I also got stressed out when an essay was due in for marking
     (1999 Senior Learner of the Year award winner, female, aged 50-59)

   - Tiredness due to working shifts as well as studying and stress
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - Lack of time and some pressure due to exams and assignments. I am occasionally physically tired
     (ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - I have found the maths leading up to exams stressful and I have felt that I could do with a better method of revision (I have small children and a job which limits the time I have to study)
     (1999, ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

6. Lack of money affected some respondents. About 4% of people felt this was the most significant disbenefit, in the main those following more substantial courses:

   - Not being able to continue due to financial problems
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59)

   - The only stress that I have experienced is getting funding for my course. I have four children and together with study this is a delicate balancing act. I believe that my studies will benefit my health and well-being in the future
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - Stress at not having any money. I would like to spend more time studying at home, but my partner starts to feel neglected
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

7. Of course, real life does not fit into boxes and some respondents felt there were several disbenefits:

   - There is not enough space here! Back problems, neck/shoulder problems, not being able to get to my mother's funeral (overseas), stress-related illness, sleep disorder, weight gain, reduced exercise opportunity, reduced social life, financial problems, dental neglect, feeling de-skilled (after being a senior professional) and relationship with spouse
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - Several of my close friends think that I am quite mad to put myself through the extra pain of trying to establish myself. This has cause a lot of friction. Due to having to buy materials my finances are in even worse shape. This has caused a lot of stress as I am still trying to keep my own small bungalow as it is ideal for my needs. Occasionally when I cannot feed myself or my dogs I wonder if learning is a monster that will eventually take all the ground from under my feet. But it is a drug
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - Stress. I had to see a doctor during the last term at university. I am a single parent on a low income and I was probably trying to juggle too much, trying to cope with my hyperactive child, a degree course and finances together with family and relationship pressures. Meeting deadlines and exams meant more pressure for me
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

8. Finally, learning new things can inadvertently bring its own bitter-sweet rewards, as in this response from a man in his 70s who left school at 15:

   - My wife's illness and her death, then the loss of my son both with schizophrenia. Writing and painting my autobiography did bring tears running down my face when writing and painting my life. This had a great part in getting the sadness out of me. Life was the way forward. I had to overcome my sadness and went on to become an author and artist, with sculpture bringing more happiness.
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 70-79)

Physical health benefits

Only 13% of respondents said they had not noticed any benefits to their physical health.

1. Those who had experienced benefits to physical health fell into three categories. First, feeling less ill, managing pain better or feeling less tired. For 33% of respondents it was not a matter of a programme of learning making respondents better. Rather, it is the learning which makes the illness or pain more bearable. Second, 22% of respondents noticed other indicators of well-being which resulted, in their view, from a period of learning. Third, some 31% reported actual physical benefits from their learning, illustrated by the buoyant comment, 'I haven't seen a doctor for over a year'. Benefits to individual physical health of a period of learning included:

   - There is no doubt that the achievement of painting with all the associated activities has helped me to overcome great health problems (bowel cancer, brain tumour, and heart problems)
     (1999 ALW winner, male, aged 70-79)

   - Folk dancing has kept me fit as well as my journey to and from college. I have to leave home at 7.30 in the morning to get there on time. Getting up and running for the bus is very healthy. I don't need to go to the doctor very often and I have not seen him in over a year
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 70-79)

   - I have felt better attending these classes, unfortunately I have been suffering from cancer since 1982 and have had to have a leg amputated, but these classes have been better than a trip to the doctor
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 70-79)

   - My mental and physical health have improved dramatically. I no longer smoke and have been able to come off medication for angina, an illness directly the result of my way of life
     (1999 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59)

   - I feel physically fitter. I walk more (being a poor student). I enjoy time with my family more and spend more quality time with them
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - I certainly feel both mentally and physically better because I have gained confidence. I do not visit the doctor as regularly and I have been able to cut down on medication. I don't know whether it is a coincidence but it happened when I started learning
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

- Line dancing certainly keeps me fitter. The fact that you have to go somewhere and do something stops you vegetating at home
  (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 50-59)

- Learning has helped my health a great deal. Since losing my eyesight I have suffered from depression and believed that I could not have quality of life. I am now able to realise that I have a lot to offer and am no longer on medication
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

- I have narcolepsy (sleeping sickness) I used to sleep 19 hours a day. Returning to learning helped me to find a reason to stay awake. I found curiosity helped me to stay awake and motivated me to become more physically active
  (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

- Absolutely. Had I not gone back to college I dread to think where I would have been now. My problems in the beginning seemed to be insurmountable, but bit by bit, day by day I regained the confidence to communicate with the outside world. I did throw away all the tablets and learned about holistic healing. College made me face things I would have otherwise avoided – possibly forever
  (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

- Now I am not bored, have no depression and hardly ever see the doctor these days. Before I was lonely, depressed, always ill and suicidal and lived at the GP's. I feel happier. Sometimes I do not sleep well because of overwork, but I would not go back to the old ways of depression, low self-esteem, etc. I don't have time to dwell on negatives
  (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

2. Managing better in spite of physical ill health, and feeling better too, was a strong theme:

   - Learning has kept me focussed and helped me through my illness. I'm still ill now, but I'm able to direct my feelings into positive rather than negative thoughts
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

   - I live alone in sheltered housing. It would be very easy for me to sit back and take it easy and make little or no effort to keep my mind and body active. Adult education makes it easy for me to want to go out, learn, stretch my imagination and meet people. I feel fine
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 80-89)

   - There has been a great change in my physical illness and I will never be cured, but I feel better when I work such as going to college and doing my course work. I generally feel less sorry for myself
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

- Since going to the psychiatric ward at Watford General Hospital and starting college, I have not had to go and visit my GP so often. I have also accepted my leg for what it is and that life carries on regardless. Now I just want to live and learn
  (1999 ALW winner, male aged 40-49)

- Learning has helped me to take my mind off the pain I suffer from my knee problems
  (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 40-49)

- Learning has helped me cope with bereavements by giving me something to strive for. This in turn helps me to alleviate stress and depression. I have not really suffered from illness, but I do have osteo-arthritis but study helps me to forget about it
  (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

3. The third main thread in relation to physical health concerns other benefits such as improvement to family health, better health behaviours and psychological well-being:

   - Achievements led to better health and happiness
     (1998 ALW nominee, male)

   - Feeling positive and achieving goals enables one to feel generally better and have a sense of having more energy
     (ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - I started to attend a gym and run as a coping mechanism, but these good intentions didn't start until I began my degree
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - My learning gives me confidence and I am able to go out and meet people. Taking walks and physical exercise enhances my outlook
     (1999 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59)

   - Learning has given me something to think about other than myself. It has taught me even though I am disabled I'm no different to anyone else and I'm not responsible for other people's reactions to me.
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - Over the years that I have been practising yoga it has made a great difference to my life in attitude, fitness and peace of mind
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - I now have a better concentration span and I don't have time to be ill anymore
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

- The whole experience has made me feel better about myself. I have previously suffered with depression and medication. This led to a dulling of my senses which I was not happy about, which also meant that I couldn't perform when required. I made the decision to end the medication and after a short period of withdrawal, I felt more in control and looked forward to a challenge and learning. Although stress levels are high sometimes when learning and achieving, goals can make you feel good about yourself. This makes you better prepared to make your conditions of life what you want them to be and more determined not to have these conditions thrust upon you. I feel more healthier mentally now which is important in developing a positive mental attitude
  (1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 40-49)

- I do not think of my illness so much (I have breast cancer) and having a job has given us more money. I am in better health overall and I have lost weight and now have a structure to my day
  (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

Emotional and mental health benefits

Some 89% of respondents felt there had been a positive emotional or mental health benefit derived from their period of learning. Only 7% felt there had not been, or they could not be sure. Attributing causal links is problematic. Nevertheless, the validity is in how people describe the experience for themselves. In the majority of cases it is overwhelmingly a positive experience and one which significantly impacts on their mental well-being.

1. The most common response was in a category of benefits from learning which could be termed simply 'feeling mentally better':

   - My hospital visits are in the same frequency but I feel mentally better
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - Makes me feel mentally better and happier
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 60-69)

   - I am less depressed and I dwell less on my illness and I am less negative about myself, my life and my capabilities. I am still self-critical and have my bad days where I feel like I cannot cope, but on the whole I am happier, livelier, more energetic and motivated. I am optimistic about the future and I feel more in control of my life
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 20-29)

   - Just being able to cope with life better
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 40-49)

   - I developed confidence and realised I was not so dumb because of my achievements. I am now sometimes less depressed and I dwell less on my problems. I am not on medication anymore, but at one time I was and I had to take them
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 20-29)

   - I feel more relaxed and happier
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

   - Meeting people has made me relax
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

   - I feel generally happier, more relaxed and at ease with myself
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

- I have built up a stronger and more rewarding relationship with my children. I find that the petty things do not worry me and I really enjoy my life to the full. Prior to learning my life was boring and routine and now I have better health, sleep and I am able to cope with stressful situations
  (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

- I definitely feel better. I have less medication and have less time to worry about my health. My brain is happier at having something specific to work on. In myself I feel more confident and positive when contemplating the future
  (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

2. Several respondents spoke candidly about their mental illness and how learning had helped:

   - It helps me with my mental health problem. It gives me something to aim for in life. It has helped me to change the environment I mix in and learning has helped me to mix with other people. I think it has helped with the symptoms of my illness
     (1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 30-39)

   - Before learning I had a nervous breakdown and had impaired self-esteem. I have made friends and I feel much better and I am willing to accept challenges. I am more relaxed and less depressed. I am getting more of a desire to learn
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - In the past I suffered from depression and with stress, mainly because of lack of self-accomplishment and poor education. Filling these empty areas in my life with learning has open up a new life for me. I am a more relaxed, happier person and more at ease with people and equal to others, fully able to stand up for myself and speak for myself
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 60-69)

   - As mentioned above, words alone cannot express how alone I was feeling, my family and friends can testify to the way in which my life was turned around. I am no longer on anti-depressants. I feel better all round. I must confess that at the time of my studies I did find it all quite stressful. I put this down to trying to push myself too hard to achieve good marks (distinction) in all subjects. Anything lower to me would have been a failure. I am aware this m[illegible]t seem strange. However, I loved my studies
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

   - I get better sleep and dwell less on ill health. I have less attendance at the Community Mental Health Centre as I have more interests and can occupy my time better at home
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 50-59)

3. Respondents commented on how learning had changed some of their health behaviours:

- Relaxation; time for myself and the ability to pace myself
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 60-69)

- I am very emotional, but I now realise that I must make the most of friendships and relationships even in the short term. My poor health is no longer a disgrace to me and I will try to concentrate on the good things
  (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59)

- I direct my feelings into positive rather than negative thoughts. I do dwell less on poor health. Learning has given me a chance to be in control of my life again and not my illness
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

- When I first retired I felt as though I was 'vegetating', since taking up learning I have felt stretched and this I believe leads to better sleep, more awareness and I generally feel more complete and content
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 60-69)

- I don't take any tablets any more and do not suffer from depression. Since my mental and emotional state has improved so has my physical health
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

- When I am working I am much less stressed. Suffering as I do with depression and anxiety, anything that makes me feel better is wonderful. I am able to cut down on some of the tablets and my sleeping is much better
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 50-59)

- Since I started going to college I feel less depressed and take very few tablets and I sleep well when I have completed my work. Until I finish my work I can't relax
  (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 40-49)

- I dwell less on ill health and I am happy that I have helped someone. I don't have any problems sleeping, but I used to
  (1998 ALW nominee, male, aged 40-49)

- I did feel less stressed and so didn't need the doctor or suffer any illness. I did feel more exhausted at some points due to working full-time and studying at night, but it was a health tiredness and I did sleep better
  (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

4. A very common theme among respondents was how the time spent learning took their mind away from 'dwelling on things':

   - My dedication to learning about myself and what I can give to other people has helped me overcome a number of illnesses. I am 100% healthier than I was in 1998-99. I am happier and I do not have time to dwell on negative things
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - Concentration has improved and because of the heavy workload I don't have time to dwell on anything
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 30-39)

   - When studying and working full-time I have no time to be depressed or to think about any personal problems. When thinking about studying it helps me to think about myself and that I am doing something for myself
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39)

   - I feel less depressed and dwell less on emotional/relationship problems
     (1997 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

5. Some nominees saw learning as a significant psychological displacement activity, which helped them to deal with their pain:

   - Being at home alone during my retirement can be quite depressing during long winter days. I found I was missing belonging somewhere and missing the company of those I worked with. Learning certainly makes me feel much happier and fulfilled
     (1999 ALW winner, female, aged 70-79)

   - My husband only just recently died and I was very lonely and so threw myself into classes. Filling my mind with other things greatly assisted me and the time was used pleasantly. I have felt much happier. Now I enjoy my time. I have started another poetry book and a novel. I am no longer lonely
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 70-79)

   - In 1994 my much-loved husband died of cancer. I was left emotionally and mentally drained and felt like there was no future for me. Since becoming involved with learning I have had a more positive attitude and become more relaxed and happier with a positive outlook to life. Because I do not have much spare time I also do not dwell on my arthritis
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 60-69)

   - I am more used to coming out and meeting people. I feel less depressed and it takes my mind off things
     (1999 Senior Learner of the Year award winner, female, aged 50-59)

6. Of course, many respondents attributed their improved sense of mental well-being with their new-found confidence and enjoyment in learning:

   - Sugarcraft skills are very therapeutic, and while I use this other problems are dealt with using a rational perspective. Enjoying what I do gives a sense of purpose and a feeling of well-being
     (1998 ALW winner, female, aged 50-59)

   - I sleep better, feel happier, etc. The feelings of self-worth, confidence and realisation of dreams have all contributed to a very positive and sustainable manner
     (1998 ALW winner, male, aged 50-59)

   - I have taken valuable time out by myself. I have gained confidence and I feel more in control, which in turn reduces the level of stress and feeling depressed. I can see a way forward, getting off the treadmill and back to contributing to society. Even if it is a long way ahead of me at least I know that the chance is there to be taken. I feel more on a level with my peers, most of which have had families and most have returned back to work
     (1999 ALW nominee, female, aged 30-39, employed)

   - I feel better mentally because of increased confidence and I feel happier
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

7. For a few respondents, learning as an adult had a central place in maintaining mental health in the face of desperate challenges. One respondent described her life as 'an episode from *EastEnders*':

   - Before I went back to college I was seriously ill with cervical cancer and I was pregnant with my youngest daughter. During this time I was constantly at the doctor's for tests of some sort or another. My husband was messing around with someone else until eventually he left me with my three children. In short my life was a mess. I decided to change my life before it changed me. Now I direct my life and it moves where I want it to move and not where it wants to. I still take HRT every day (which is OK) and still get the odd headache (usually from not eating regularly) but generally I'm not at the doctor's very much now. Learning has helped me to feel better emotionally and mentally. I attribute all of my success to my determination to learn something new. Before I started to change my life it was like an episode from *EastEnders*
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

   - It kept my sanity through an extremely bloody divorce. It gave me a focus
     (1998 ALW nominee, female, aged 40-49)

Influencers and supporters

A surprising 20% of respondents said they were first encouraged to participate in learning by people working in educational settings. Other key influencers were friends, partners and members of the family. It is clear that professional staff working in education, health or social care settings have a strong influence on adults' re-engagement in learning. Of particular interest in this study is the fact that teachers and education staff were seen by 40% of learners as the most important influence in continuing to learn. Health professionals were strong influencers when it comes to first participating (8%) but less so later on.

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The Impact of Learning on Health

Fiona Aldridge and Peter Lavender

This NIACE survey, focussing on previous years' Adult Learners' Week nominees, examines what impact, if any, there has been on personal health as a result of learning. The majority of respondents reveal positive benefits to mental, emotional and physical health such as increased confidence and self-esteem, being better able to cope with illness, feeling less ill and changing health behaviours. Some also report 'dis-benefits' such as stress, anxiety and relationship difficulties. The responses are both a powerful argument for closer study and a strong justification for the belief that learning can make a difference to individuals, their health and the well-being of their families and friends.

Further research is required to identify the extent of health improvement through learning and to find out how those who do not participate can be encouraged to do so.

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